DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 241 994 EA 015 997

TITLE	Effective School PR and How to Get It.
INSTITUTION	National Association of Elementary School Principals, Reston, VA.
PUB DATE	Dec 82
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091 ($0.50; quantity discounts available).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Collected Works - Serials (C22)
JOURNAL CIT	Here's How; v1 n3 Dec 1982
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Communication Skills; Elementary Education; Elementary Schools; *Organizational Communication; Parent School Relationship; *Principals; *Public Relations; Public Schools; School Activities; School Attitudes; School Community Programs; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	PF Project

ABSTRACT

One of a series of practitioner-oriented newsletters, the document provides elementary school principals with strategies for implementing effective public relations in the public schools. The article describes ways in which principals can assess their school's public relations needs, coordinate the various elements of communication, and evaluate their communication efforts without adding significant costs in time, money, or personnel. (LH)

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EFFECTIVE SCHOOL PR AND HOW TO GET IT

December 1982

EA 015 997

National Association of Elementary School Principals
Reston, Virginia

Here's How...
vol. 1, no. 3, December 1982

Effective School PR and How to Get It

Volume 1, Number 3 · December 1982

Public schools depend on public commitment to education. Winning that commitment is the responsibility of every educator, but it is the principal who must take the lead in building public support for the school's total educational program.

There is little question that the public's attitudes toward public education are forged right at the local school level. People's beliefs about schooling are based primarily on their own experiences as students, what they know about local schools, and, if they are parents, their children's experiences in those schools.

Similarly, there is little question that the principal is the school's key communicator, the link between the school family and the larger community. Finding themselves "in the middle" is certainly no new experience for principals; what may be new is recognizing the positive potential of that position.

Most principals put school public relations high on their list of priorities, but few feel they can take time from their other duties to mount a comprehensive building-level PR effort and fewer still are trained in PR or communications. "If the schools are doing a good job," many principals believe, "the parents will know it. And that's what counts."

But it's not as simple as that. True, the parents of public school students *do* tend to have a pretty good idea of what kind of job their local school is doing. But a declining birth rate and a maturing population mean that fewer and fewer adults in a given community will have children attending the community's schools. According to the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), almost three-quarters of today's adults have no children in the public schools.

Thus, winning the commitment of the entire community requires more than depending on support from parents of public-school students. It requires a commitment to better communications, backed up with an organized communications plan.

The chances are that many elements of such a plan are already in place in your school. But are you getting the right message to the right people at the right time? Here are some ways you can assess your school's public relations needs, coordinate the various elements of communication, and evaluate your communications effort—without adding significant costs in time, money, or personnel.

Taking Your School's PR Pulse

Effective public relations doesn't just happen. It takes careful planning, and an important part of that planning involves assessing the scope and purpose of your communications program.

Most principals find that planning for building-level public relations is more effective with the help of others who will be involved in the program.

One approach is to form a school communications committee that includes at least one teacher, one support staff member, one parent, and, if possible, a representative from the local community who is not a parent.

A first step for the committee is to "brainstorm" a list of existing communications activities. The school newsletter is obviously one, as is the annual back-to-school night or open house. Parent-teacher conferences, written reports to parents, advisory committees, and news releases or announcements all belong on the list. You may be pleasantly surprised to realize how many things you are already doing to communicate with your school's various publics.

The next step is to identify those publics. For convenience, you might list them in terms of two broad categories:

- *Internal publics*, or teaching staff, support staff, students, student teachers and substitutes, and other district personnel.
- *External publics*, or parents, nonparents, community and business leaders, and senior citizens, to name a few.

According to Duane Bachman, coauthor of NSPRA's *PR Programs for Small, Suburban and Large Districts*, it is important not to set up categories that are so broad as to be meaningless. "An external public labeled 'parents' may look sufficient," writes Bachman, "but unless that term is divided further to include 'parents of public school children,' 'parents of nonpublic students,' parents of preschool children,' and 'parents of students who have graduated,' it may be nearly impossible to focus on the specific needs of each group."

One way to focus on the information needs of each of the publics you have identified is to draw up what Bachman calls a *communications grid*. Very simply, a communications grid is a chart that lists the school's internal and external publics along one axis and its current communications activities along the other. By checking which activity reaches which public, you can get a good fix on the publics you are not currently reaching.

Planning Your Program

As important as it is to know who your publics are and what you are doing to reach them, it is equally important to find out what they already know about the school and what they want—and need—to know. Nonparents in particular may have some misconceptions about public education that could be dispelled by getting to know what goes on in their local schools. Even parents of students in your school may be familiar only with those programs and activities that involve their own children.

Brief questionnaires distributed at school programs or delivered with the school newsletter give parents a chance to rate the school—on everything from the cafeteria to the curriculum to the bus schedules. They also give you a chance to ask parents what programs and services they want to know more about.

To reach other external publics, some schools have canvassed their attendance area, asking residents if they know where the school is located, whom they know at the school, and what they know about the educational program.

Another way to find out what your community thinks about your school is to form a network of *key communicators*—local opinion leaders who can serve as channels for dialogue about school affairs. Key communicators can be barbers, beauticians, police officers, merchants, clergy—anyone who regularly talks to large numbers of people.

Meet regularly, but briefly, with your key communicators to keep them up to date on school activities and send them a steady flow of information. Ask them, in turn, to let you know what they hear people saying—good or bad—about the school and its doings.

Once you have gathered information about all your publics and what they know or want to know about the school, you will be ready to get down to specifics of who will do what and when. In addition to such ongoing communications activities as the school newsletter, a realistic goal is to carry out one major PR activity each month during the school year. The communications program you develop this year can be built on and revised next year, depending on your changing PR goals and priorities as well as evaluations of the effectiveness of previous communications efforts.

PR Ideas That Work

You don't have to reinvent the wheel to have an effective school PR program, and you don't have to be a Las Vegas entertainer or a media wizard to get people's attention. But do remember these few basic guidelines:

1. *Begin with quality instruction.* All the PR in the world will not compensate for a low-quality educational program.
2. *Involve your entire staff*—cook and custodian as well as teachers. Involve them in decision making and let them know that you appreciate their contributions.
3. *Remember to listen as well as talk.* Be attuned to what both your internal and your external publics are saying and thinking about the school.
4. *Realize that a good school climate is just as vital to communications as it is to school effectiveness.* In a school with a warm, caring atmosphere, information will travel to you easily.
5. *Pay attention to first impressions—your own and your school's.* Make sure visitors are treated like VIPs, not intruders. Be welcoming and receptive no matter how rushed you are. Keep the school building and grounds well maintained, and brighten the institutional atmosphere with student art displays.

These five basics are automatic to most successful principals—and they are essential underpinnings of any sustained public relations program. Without the basics, splashy special events will have little or no lasting effect on how your publics perceive you and your school. But with them, even those little extra touches will carry more weight. Here are some "extra touches" gathered from PR-conscious principals:

- *Listening cards.* The Piqua City, Ohio, schools distribute three kinds of feedback cards: "I Heard a Rumor About the Piqua Schools," "I Have an Idea to Improve the Piqua Schools," and "I Have a Question about the Piqua Schools." The cards, preaddressed and with space for the respondent's name if desired, are placed in the public library, in banks, and other places. Listening Cards show that the schools are interested in hearing from their clients.
- *Neighborhood walk.* Along with a few staff members and parent leaders, walk through the school neighborhood on a holiday or in the early evening. Visit with residents, merchants, and others you meet, and invite them to visit the school. If some of the students in your school are bused in from other neighborhoods, this is a good way to make residents there feel like part of the school community.
- *Informa-Phone.* By installing a message unit and some extra phone lines, the Worrall School in Broomall, Pennsylvania, opened up a 24-hour communications link with the public. Recorded messages announce schedules and special events, highlight student achievements, and, on snow days or in case of emergency, announce procedures for the day.
- *Welcoming new students.* When a new family moves into your area, send a welcoming note, and follow up with a home visit after the children have been in school for a few days. If the family has missed your yearly open house, they will appreciate this chance to ask questions about school programs and procedures.
- *Phone home.* Ask teachers to make at least one phone call a week reporting something good a student has done. Or make the calls yourself. One principal carries a cordless telephone with him when he visits classrooms. When he sees something noteworthy, he pulls out his phone and has the student put in a call to his or her parents then and there.
- *Harnessing "gray power."* Involving senior citizens takes more than hosting an annual "Grandparents' Day." Many schools invite retirees in as volunteers or guest lecturers or as paid office or classroom aides. The school will benefit from their experience and expertise—and gain a new corps of good-will ambassadors.
- *Evening coffee.* Informal meetings with groups of parents in one parent's house are an ideal way to communicate with this particular public. One principal who holds such meetings regularly follows up with thank-you notes and a brief evaluation form to gauge the effectiveness of each meeting and uncover any areas of lingering concern.
- *Business partners.* Local businesses can be the source of much more than financial support. The revenues from ads in school publications are welcome, of course, but so is the special expertise business representatives can contribute to career awareness and staff development programs. You can reciprocate by arranging exhibits of student art in local places of business, particularly at holiday time.
- *Vandal alert.* Enlist the aid of nearby residents in a campaign against vandalism. The David Douglas School in Portland, Oregon, made up stickers with emergency numbers printed on them, and asked each principal to distribute the stickers to all houses within view of the school, along with a letter asking residents to report any suspicious activity. Some of the district's schools organized students in a war against litter. The two activities resulted in a heightened sense of ownership—and pride—in the school.
- *Pat on the back.* Often, parents hear from the principal only when something is wrong. Accentuate the positive by sending "happy-grams" or other quick congratulatory notes whenever a student deserves special recognition. Post snapshots of the students on the school's "Hall of Fame" bulletin board, and then send the pictures home for the family scrapbook. And don't limit your pats on the back to students: staff members and volunteers will also appreciate your thanks.

Evaluating Your PR Program

You can usually tell if your communications efforts have borne fruit. Parents will call to thank you for the "happy-grams" their children brought home. Community leaders will ask to be included in advisory committees or school-business projects.

This kind of feedback indicates how the community is receiving your communications efforts, but is by no means scientific. If your program has been successful, you will want to know more precisely what made it work and what, if anything, may have gone wrong.

Simple surveys conducted by phone, by mail, or in person can pinpoint both particularly successful elements of your communications plan and those elements that are not working as well as you had hoped.

A PR diary or log is also valuable. Keeping a record of goals, plans, timetables, staff assignments, and responses or reactions to particular activities will be invaluable when it comes time to plan for next year.

Feedback—both informal and formal—and a record of your activities are essential to an ongoing PR program. The log will help ensure continuity, and the evaluation results will guide you in revising the specifics of your program.

Need More Help?

A good place to go for help in building a school-based PR program is the National School Public Relations Association, whose publications formed the basis for this report. For information about NSPRA publications, contact: NSPRA, 1801 N. Moore St., Arlington, VA 22209.

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